Why Your Screen Story Is Not Accepted

By LEWIS ALLEN BROWNE

FOR years the humorists have been telling us that everyone from the bootblack to the Senator and from "The colonel's lady to Judy O'Grady," wrote plays, for the spoken drama. And if that be true, then everyone has of recent years written scores and scores of plays, for the silent drama.

The thousands of manuscripts that pour into every picture producing company's editorial office daily would make it seem that this was a fact. It is not unusual for some of the larger motion picture producing concerns to receive from 1,200 to 3,000 manuscripts in a day! And even the largest of the producing concerns seldom produce more than eighty pictures in a year. Many concerns consider it a big year if they produce twelve features and fifty-two short comedies in a year. Yet these concerns receive anywhere from 50,000 to 300,000 manuscripts within that time.

Take into consideration the fact that many of the photoplays are made from novels and from the spoken drama, and the percentage of original photoplay manuscripts that are produced is exceedingly small, much smaller than the legal per cent of alcohol in our beverages as fixed by the Eighteenth Amendment.

Yet photoplay producers pay big salaries to trained men to find suitable picture material, producers advertise in writers' publications for good photoplay manuscripts, and large staffs of experts daily read mountain-high piles of manuscripts in the hope of finding one that is suitable for screen production. When they do find such a manuscript they actually chortle with joy as if they had found a five carat steel blue diamond in a sifter full of ashes.

Stories of fabulous prices paid for good screen stories have had much to do with the flood of material that is being written by almost everyone, and sent back by almost every manuscript reader. But another reason has been the advertisements of late years which appeared with a line something like this:

ANYONE CAN WRITE
A PHOTOPLAY.
Fortunes Quickly Made.

The advertisements vary a little in text but convey the same meaning and for sums ranging anywhere from $25 down to $5 these advertisers promise to make a photoplay writer of you.

Naturally everyone, apparently, started in writing for the screen. I have had many hundred "scenarios," as most of them were incorrectly called, submitted to me on which to pass judgment. Probably I have read a thousand in the past year or so and out of that lot I found but two that I believed salable. Only one of the two has sold, as yet. The reasons why these other manuscripts were not suitable might be enumerated in the following order:

Not a story, but a mere incident.
Lack of heart interest.
Not enough action for half a reel.
Impossible to produce.
Plot previously used scores of times.
Stories the censors would not pass.

The first fault, most frequently made, is that of taking some slight incident and writing words and words and words around it. Always keep in mind that the best pictures are those that need the fewest explanations, the fewest words thrown on the screen. Let the action tell the story wherever it is possible. If the heroine is weeping, there is no need of throwing on the screen the explanation: "Imogene is broken-hearted." We know she is not crying because her heart is full of joy. If the villain plans to rob the safe when he sees the host place "the papers" therein, he shows by the expression of his face, by the watchfulness, the use of his eyes, by action, that he intends to get those papers, and there is no need of throwing on the screen, "Rodney decides that he will rob the safe."

I recall one manuscript which contained about five thousand words, and this is actually all of the action there was in it: Mary expects her cousin, whom she has never seen, to arrive on the train. She has promised to marry him. She meets another man at the train, of the same name, a low-brow fellow whom she could never love and she goes home heart-broken and is just about to commit suicide when the cousin arrives by the next train and she falls into his arms.

Five thousand words to tell that. And all of this could be run off on about three hundred feet of film.

The next reason why so few screen stories are not accepted is because they lack heart interest. We want the good old-fashioned emotions on the screen, love, hate, envy, greed, and always a pictorial proof of the old saying that the course of true love never did run smooth. Yet many of the manuscripts are devoted to things that would interest perhaps only fifty in an audience of 1,500. Bear in mind that the picture that will be shown by every exhibitor who can get it, and the picture that is demanded by every exhibitor is the one the producers pay their expenses with and also their income taxes and leave a surplus for yachts, villas, limousines and a personal check account. I have seen long, well-written manuscripts, as to the English, devoted to the story of an invention, with no love interest, no lover, no girl, nothing but the pleasure of the young inventor when he sold his patent. I have seen others devoted entirely to the story of how a girl worked and saved, invested in real estate, sold half of it and built a cozy home, leaving her rocking on the sunny porch, alone!

Don't do it! Movie fans won't stand for it. They know that it is not good for a man or woman to live alone, and the producers know that they know it, and they won't buy stories that fail to please the "fans."

There is generally more action, that is, more things happen, in picture than in the average novel. A short story may be one incident, and brilliant dialogue written about it. A picture must have a whole lot happen because mere words are not pictures. A great many short stories contain enough action for a picture, but the majority of them do not. The amateur at photoplay writing takes an incident and mistakes it for a big picture plot.

Another fault is a tendency to forget that the story must be *photographed*, and many of them are made up of things that cannot well be shown by landscapes, human beings and mechanical and human action. Consider such sentences as these:

"Mildred blushed prettily."

If Mildred actually blushes on the screen, if the warm red blood makes her plump cheeks carmine, you would think that Mildred were suddenly being changed by some witch from a fair complexioned white girl to an ebon-hued Nubian, because red photographs black!

"She wore a beautiful pale blue dress—" and so on, hundreds of words of description, have I read, of the gowns worn, which is a waste of words. A pale blue dress would photograph white. Leave the costuming to the producers. The chances are that our famous picture stars would prefer to select their own gowns, rather than have unknown persons dictate as to what they should wear.

Avoid the grewsome, avoid murders wherever possible, avoid, to be on the safe side, sex stories of a nature you would not want your own children or your little brothers and sisters to read. The producers will take few chances with them, for there are picture censors with keen eyes and, whether they have keen and fair judgment or not, their word is law. The over-modest Pennsylvania censors will not permit the showing of a wife making a layette! Not many censors are as strict as that, but if you watch the pictures with care you will see that where it is necessary to kill a man in the story, the actual death scene is avoided wherever possible. A recent movie suicide kindly stepped behind some portiers, there was a puff of smoke, people rushed out, we saw just the upturned toes of the man, and we knew what had happened. The days of the death-agony, the stabbing, garreting, shooting all shown in detail, are evidently over.

It has been said over and over that one need not be a skilled writer of stories to write a photoplay. This is true, in a measure. But one should be a skilled teller of *stories*. If you have a good story, a good plot, you may split an infinitive on every page, you may misspell a few words in each paragraph, you may use commas instead of colons, but "get your story over."

Scenarios are not necessary. In fact a good working synopsis is much preferred. The scenario should only be attempted by the experienced continuity writer, as the amateur is likely to lose much of the story in attempting to write by scenes, to cut in with subtitles, to give continuity numbers and jumps back to old scenes by numbers and it is slow and difficult work.

Do not be frightened by the word "synopsis." It means that the story is told without frills, without dialogue, except where absolutely necessary explanation for sub-titles or "leaders" are used.

The best synopsis form is third person, present tense. Give a cast of characters, as is done with a play for the spoken stage. Then begin your story and tell it straight through. From ten to thirty typewritten pages will suffice to tell almost any feature or super-feature of from five to seven or more reels.

Do not write that "John went to the window and looked out." That is past tense. It has been done. The reader pictures it as something that is past. Write it: "John goes to window, looks out." Now you are telling something that is happening at the moment.

To attempt to write slop-stick comedies, the fall-down-stairs, hit-with-pie, soused-with-a-fire-hose sort, is not worth while. These are "made up" on the "lot," that is, at the studio. The director knows just what people he has, and what material he has and he invents laugh-provoking stunts first, then builds more or less of a plot or story—generally very much "less"—around those funny situations.

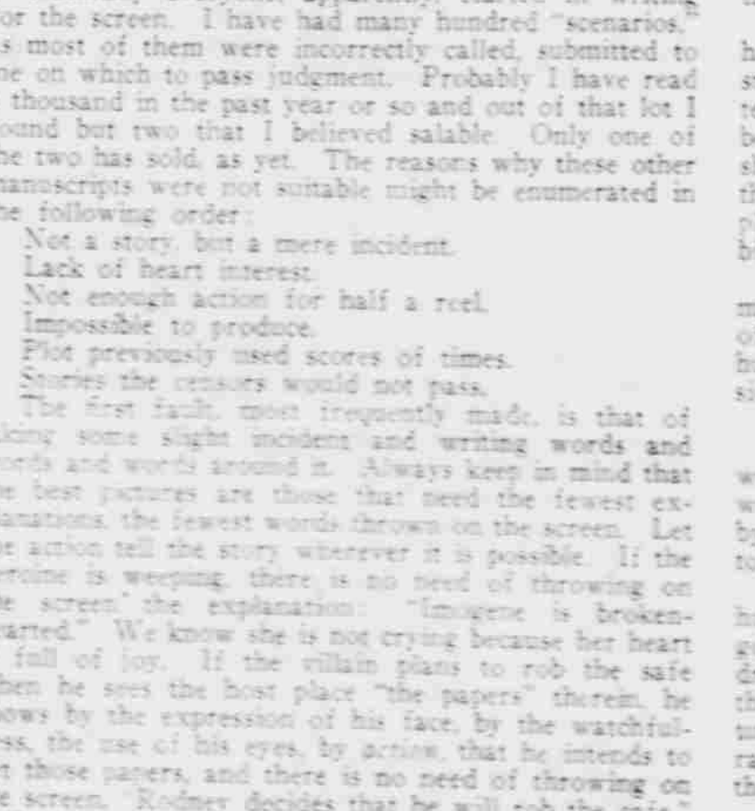
As for prices paid, they are not fabulous. Just as it is with magazines, in rates of payment, so it is with picture producers. Some magazines pay half a cent a word, others pay five and ten cents a word. Some producers pay $500 for a five reel photoplay, but these are considered "pikers" today. One thousand dollars for a good five reel photoplay is a fair price. If you have made a name, if you have something unusual, you may get $2,000 or $2,500 for it. Picture rights to books and plays bring more money. One well-known novel brought to the heirs of the authoress, $40,000 for picture rights. But most novels bring, for picture rights, from $3,000 to $5,000. Plays bring various prices. Ten thousand dollars was paid for the screen rights of "Please Get Married." Before it was produced on Broadway and made a hit, it was offered, as a photoplay, for a thousand dollars, and turned down.

But producers cannot get enough good material. A thousand dollars for a five thousand word synopsis is good value for the majority of the pictures put over. Comedies bring from $100 to $500 a reel.

Sit down now and dash off that photoplay superfeature, but do not order the new limousine until the check comes through; it might develop into an embarrassing situation.

ACCOMPANYING Mr. Browne's manuscript was this note: Here is the article about writing for the screen, that you asked me to submit. It ought to help the amateurs. I can vouch for its accuracy, for I have had a great many of my stories produced and know considerably of what is wanted and what is not wanted. It has taken me many years to learn the things set down in this article for the benefit of those interested.

Growing Old Gracefully



DR. STEPHEN SMITH

DR. STEPHEN SMITH
Born 1823—Age 96

THIS remarkable man who is very close to the hundred mark has been one of the most prominent physicians of the country. During the Civil War when modern surgery with the use of anesthetics first began, he was a leader and teacher. His text book on operative surgery was used constantly on the battlefields. He was one of the most successful health commissioners of New York City and served from 1868-1875. His formula for a long life is, "Keep alert, keep occupied, keep in touch, read the news, seek contact with men and women who are active and your health in ninety cases out of a hundred will take care of itself."

JOSEPH GURNEY CANNON

JOSEPH GURNEY CANNON
Born 1836—Age 83

"UNCLE JOE" CANNON is the senior member of the United States Congress and with the exception of one term, has been a member of Congress since 1861. He has been prominent on many committees and is still a power. His quaint figure and his big cigar are well known in Washington.

It is literal truth to say that he appears and acts much younger than many of his colleagues who are 25 years younger. He constantly seeks young company and often drops in at the Press Club for lunch or dinner. He still loves a jolly dance, a three-hour banquet of good food and humor, a cigar and a good bout of story-telling.